

**Article:** (JS294) Anatman/atman (No-self/Self)

**Words:** 1000

**Contributor(s):** K. T. S. Sarao

The Vedic Sanskrit term *ātman* (Pāli, *attā*), literally meaning ‘breath, or spirit,’ is often translated into English as ‘self, soul, or ego.’ Etymologically, *anātman* (Pāli, *anattā*) consists of the negative prefix *an* plus *ātman*, (i.e., ‘without ātman’) and is translated as ‘no-self, no-soul, or no-ego.’ These two terms have been employed in the religious and philosophical writing of India to refer to essence of man. The idea of ātman was fully developed by the Upaniṣadic and Vedāntic thinkers who suggested that there does exist in one’s personality, a permanent, unchanging, immutable, omnipotent and an intelligent ātman, which is free from sorrow and leaves the body at death. The *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad*, for instance, says that the ātman is “without decay, death, grief.” Similarly, the *Bhagavadgītā* calls the ātman as “eternal... unborn... undying... immutable, primordial... all-pervading.” Some Upaniṣads hold that the ātman can be separated from the body like the sword from its scabbard and can travel at will away from the body, especially in sleep. But Buddhism maintains that since everything is impermanent, the question of ātman as a self-subsisting entity does not arise. It points out that as impermanence is fraught with sorrow, what is liable to sorrow cannot be the self of a thing.

According to Buddhism, beings and inanimate objects of the world are constituted (*saṃskṛta*) as distinguished from Nirvāṇa, which is unconstituted (*asaṃskṛta*). The constituted elements are made up of the five aggregates or building blocks (Sanskrit, *skandhas*; Pāli, *khandhas*): the physical body (*rūpa*), physical sensation (*vedanā*), sense perception (*saṃjñā*, *saññā*), habitual tendencies (*saṃskāra*, *saṃkhārā*), and consciousness (*viññāna*, *viññāna*). The last four of these skandhas are also collectively known as *nāma* which denotes the non-material or mental constituents of a being. *Rūpa* represents material only and inanimate objects therefore are included in the term *rūpa*. A living being composed of five skandhas is beginningless, and is in a continuous state of flux, each preceding group of skandhas giving rise to a subsequent group of skandhas. This process is going on momentarily and ceaselessly in the present existence as it will go on also in the future until the eradication of avidyā (ignorance) and the attainment of Nirvāṇa. Thus, Buddhist analysis of the nature of the person centers on the realization that what appears to be an individual is, in fact, an ever-changing combination of the five skandhas. They combine in various configurations to form what is experienced as a person just like a chariot built of various parts. But just as the chariot as an entity disappears when its constituent elements are pulled apart, so does the person disappear with the dissolution of the skandhas. Thus, what we experience to be a person is not a thing but a process; there is no human being, there is only becoming. When asked who, in the absence of a self, is it that has feeling or other sensations, the Buddha’s answer was that there is no one who feels, but there is feeling, which is a totally different proposition.

Just as the human being is analysed into its component parts, so is the external world with which he enters into relationship. This relationship is one of consciousness (*viññāna*) established through cognitive faculties (*indriya*) and their objects. These faculties and their objects, called ‘sphere’ (*āyatana*), include both sense and sense-object, the meeting of which two is necessary for consciousness. These three factors that together comprise cognition, i.e., the sense-faculty, the sense-object and the resultant consciousness, are classified under the name *dhātu*. The human personality, including, the external world with which it enters into relationship, is thus divided into skandha, *āyatana* and *dhātu*. The generic name for all three of them is *dharma* which, in this context, is translated as ‘elements of existence.’ The universe is made up of a bundle of elements or forces (*saṃskāras*) and is in a continuous flux or flow (*santāna*). Every dharma, though appearing only for a single instant (*kṣaṇa*) is a ‘dependently-

originating element,' i.e., it depends for its origin on what had gone before it. Thus, existence becomes 'dependent existence' where there is no destruction of one thing and no creation of another. Falling within this scheme, the individual is entirely phenomenal, governed by the laws of life and lacking any extra-phenomenal self within him.

In the absence of an ātman, one may ask as to how does Buddhism account for the existence of human beings, their identity, continuity, and ultimate religious goal. At the level of "conventional truth," Buddhism accepts that in the daily transactional world, humans can be named and recognized as more or less stable persons. However, at the level of the "ultimate truth," this unity and stability of personhood is only a sense-based construction of our productive imagination. What the Buddha encouraged is not the annihilation of the feeling of self, but the elimination of the belief in a permanent and eternal "ghost in the machine," so to say. Thus, human in Buddhism, is a concrete living, striving creature and his personality is something that changes, evolves and grows. It is the concrete human, not the transcendental self that ultimately achieves perfection by constant effort and creative will.

The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth is different from the theory of reincarnation which implies the transmigration of an ātman and its invariable material rebirth. As the process of one life-span is possible without a permanent entity passing from one thought-moment to another, so a series of life-processes is possible without anything to transmigrate from one existence to another. An individual during the course of his existence is always accumulating fresh karma affecting every moment of his life. At death, the change is only comparatively deeper. The corporeal bond, which held him together, falls away and his new body, determined by his karma, becomes one fitted to that sphere in which he is born. The last thought-moment of this life perishes conditioning another thought-moment in a subsequent life. The new being is neither absolutely the same, since it has changed, nor totally different, being the same stream of karma energy. There is merely a continuity of a particular life-flux; just that and nothing more. The Buddhists employ various similes, such as that of the flame to explain that nothing transmigrates from one life to another. Rebirth is like the transmission of a flame from one group to another. The flame of life is continuous although there is an apparent break at so-called death. As pointed out in the *Milindapañha* "it is not the same mind and body that is born into the next existence, but with this mind and body... one does a deed... and by reason of this deed another mind and body is born into the next existence." The first moment of the new life is called consciousness (*viññāna*); its antecedents being the *saṃskāras*, the pre-natal forces. There is a 'descent' of the consciousness into the womb of the mother preparatory to rebirth, but this 'descent' is only an expression to denote the simultaneity of death and rebirth. In this way, the elements that constitute the empirical individual are constantly changing but they will never totally disappear till the conditions and causes that hold them together and impel them to rebirth, the craving (*taṇhā*), strong attachment (*upādāna*) and the desire for re-existence (*bhava*), are finally extinguished.

**Bibliography:**

Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962: 34-46. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, London: Macmillan, 1976. D.J. Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology*, New York: SUNY Press, 1987: 38-43. T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 2nd ed., London, 1970. Joaquín Pérez-Remón, *Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism*, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, rev. ed., Bedford: The Gordon Fraser Gallery Ltd, 1967: 51-66. Lynn A. de Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity*, Colombo: The Study Centre for Religion and Society, 1975.

K.T.S. Sarao